

## Swale Borough Council Productivity Plan

### **1. How we have transformed the way we design and deliver services to make better use of resources.**

- 1.1. To become more productive the council has restructured its senior management team; and introduced a continuous programme of service review and improvement across all council functions. This includes maximising the use of new technology with the introduction of interactive forms and the roll out of M365 and the collaborative use of teams channels and setting up and expanding of a shared services operating model in partnership with several neighbouring authorities. We now have 10 services in our partnership, which has delivered efficiency savings and provided much needed resilience in services.
- 1.2. Our productivity is measured in the delivery of frontline and back office services within our annual budget and benchmarked against a suite of corporate and operations performance management targets. These are monitored, reviewed and reported to senior management and members on a regular basis. Evidenced by the publication of unqualified annual accounts and sound audit findings across internal, governance and value for money audits.
- 1.3. Improvements made to services that have delivered resilience and enhancement to our service delivery include a review of our housing operating model that has delivered over £400k reductions in expenditure. We have rationalised our office space and made improvements to the building to reduce our carbon footprint and free up space for commercial letting. We have transformed the planning service resulting in improved productivity in terms of planning applications processed per officer per week. This has been driven by improvements in staff wellbeing, and corresponding staff satisfaction and retention. A key change which enabled this was the introduction of a more streamlined approach to customer contact.
- 1.4. Transformation plans include the transfer of Revenues and Benefits service to a shared service model across 3 local authorities with a view to maximising AI technology where possible. Using partnerships with external partners to fill the gaps in services that are hard to recruit to maintain service delivery requirements in teams such as Legal services and Internal Audit. Use of cloud based technology to remove reliance on single data storage facilities and onsite hosted software.
- 1.5. We are researching the implications of a corporate model of document management to support all service areas and reviewing the operating model for all services currently delivered via a major contract with third party providers. Our work on our Customer Access Strategy will support the transformation of how and when we interact with our customers across all service areas. Changes will be measured in monetary terms by way of the cost of service delivery, but more importantly the impact on the quality of service for customers.
- 1.6. Significant savings have been made across services in recent years and so looking ahead, the capacity for further reductions in cost is diminished unless we stop delivering some services altogether. Efficiencies have been made across all service areas with the reduction in the number of council employees over recent years evidencing that position. Teams with higher transactional activities are those with the scale to deliver any remaining savings that will outweigh the cost of investment, our work on technology savings is focussed on those teams.
- 1.1. The preventative work that has been delivered to support longer term cost pressures include the work of Community Development supporting the voluntary sector to intervene at early enough

stages to reduce reliance on council services. We have also had a strong focus on the Cost of Living Crisis ensuring the collective effort has the most impact on those in need, thus steaming away demand for Council services. Within the housing options service clients are dealt with promptly and a proactive prevention team is in place to work with clients at an early stage. We are also part of a Kent wide project using predictive analysis to identify individuals that are at risk of homelessness and offering support early on.

- 1.7. We provide rent concessions to organisations to enable delivery of services that reduce the burden on local government.
  - 1.8. Local reforms that could help deliver public services would be closer working with health, prison and probation services without risk of cost shunting from one area to another.
- 2. How we plan to take advantage of technology and make better use of data to improve decision making, service design and use of resources.**
- 2.1 In compliance with the local government transparency code the required data is published and available for residents to view. Plans for improving the data we capture include the introduction of mobile forms that support the front line service operations and to capture essential data from residents.
  - 2.2 Swale has recently been awarded a Platinum Award for Address and Street Data, demonstrating our commitment to making the best use of technology.
  - 2.3 We use data to provide the basis of evidence to support our planning decisions and are working with partners on a project that identifies gaps in support to our customers that will help with preventive support that reduces the demand on other services.
  - 2.4 We have introduced a new waste data collection process with the introduction of Granicus forms that delivers an end to end reporting function and a housing options customer portal that allows customers to self serve and track their own cases.
  - 2.5 The most significant barrier we have from legacy systems is the lack of a consistent basis of data capture – this is a symptom of an organisation that delivers a widespread range of services that do not always interact other than being delivered by the council (eg planning and council tax collection). Data protection legislation also restricts the information sharing within the organisation unless specifically requested at the point of capture – this is often a source of annoyance for residents who believe that they have provided information to the council once and do not understand why we can't automatically share data between teams.
  - 2.6 The cost of training, migrating or upskilling to use alternative systems is also a barrier to moving from existing systems.
  - 2.7 Sharing information with other organisations is key to service delivery, however GDPR restrictions can hamper the outcomes. We currently operate within the requirements of each organisation based on the needs of the customer and on a case by case basis when necessary.
  - 2.8 There are always opportunities to use new technology to improve workflows and systems, however the scale of the activity needs to be measured to ensure the cost of investment proves value for money. Any opportunity that plans to use AI will be delivered in a controlled environment to minimise the impact of unintended consequences.

### **3. Our plans to reduce wasteful spend within our organisation and systems.**

- 3.1 We have a programme of service review and continuous improvement that aims to reduce waste and build resilience within our services. Financial outcomes are captured and monitored within the regular budget monitoring, reporting and resource planning process. The financial position of local councils has led to significant savings having to be found across all service areas and this had been done by reducing spend and increasing income opportunities. Customer needs and expectations in recent years has outweighed the ability for us to raise sufficient additional income to cover the growing demand and inflation costs of some services.
- 3.2 We have invested in the following services that have resulted in reduced cost of service delivery, improved the quality of the service and/or raised additional income:
- 3.3 CCTV control centre upgrades have been a platform to support other internal services and has been rolled out to other organisations.
- 3.4 Provision of council owned temporary accommodation to reduce the reliance on third party providers of high cost placements.
- 3.5 The council complies with its duties under the Public Sector Equalities Act and provides relevant training on an e-learning training platform. Staff are required to complete the Equality Act module every 3 years. As the module forms part of a wider learning platform it is difficult to breakdown the cost of that specific module. We have recently introduced neurodiversity training for all staff at a cost of £2,160 in 2023/24.
- 3.6 In 2023/24 the cost of agency staff was 15% of our total salary costs and there are 17 temporary staff that have been in place for more than one year.
- 3.7 We have a robust system of internal controls to ensure accountability of our spend. The council's financial management system is structured to ensure spend is raised and approved at the appropriate level and the financial data is reported on a regular basis to senior managers and members. Further controls are in place to reconcile our payroll positions, bank reconciliation and high value spend requires further approval by the Head of Finance and Procurement before payment is released. This position is evidence by our internal and external audit opinions that are published annually.
- 3.8 We have an office sharing agreement in place across the whole of the county where council staff are able to work from any council building within Kent. We also share our own office building with the Police, Domestic abuse service providers and the Health and Care Partnership.
- 3.9 The Transparency Act requires us to publish the details of the proportion of our paybill that is spent on trade union time and this requirement is complied with annually, the request to include that data within this plan is a duplication of effort. For information it is 0.1%.

### **4. The barriers preventing progress that the Government can help to reduce or remove**

- 4.1 The barriers that prevent progress and hinder productivity that can be reduced or removed by Government are as follows:
  - Local Authority accounting and external audit requirements – simplifying the local authority framework will reduce the cost of delivery and create a system that is fit for purpose. The Redmond review findings have taken too long to deliver and do not go far enough.

- Uncertainty of government funding and grant allocations coupled with time limited grant allocations make long term budget planning almost impossible leading to short term solutions and lack of long term investment in service improvement and transformation. The most significant issue is the uncertainty regarding the reset of localisation of business rate income which could leave Swale with a funding deficit in excess of £6m.
- The “beauty contest” regime of bidding for pots of government funding which is often overly complex and requires the use of consultants to meet the timescale and specialisms of the grant bid process. This also leads to those with the best bid writers being awarded grant rather than most in need.
- The monitoring and reporting mechanism of many government grant allocations is onerous and not proportionate to the level of funding awarded – it also takes no account of the existing controls and audit processes in place for local government.
- Local Housing Allowance (LHA) subsidy rate for temporary accommodation is currently set at January 2011 levels, this is unacceptable given requirement to use temporary accommodation and increased costs incurred by local councils. Suppressing the subsidy to this rate does not impact on providers or support a reduction in demand, it places a huge burden on local authority budgets.
- Drainage Board Levy funding – the council is part of the LGA SIG aiming to address the burden on local government budgets arising from the requirement to pay drainage board levies with increases in excess of the council tax referendum limit and so impacting on council service budgets.
- Restrictions on the increase in certain fees and charges eg taxi licensing where efficiency savings result in a reduction in fee rather than the ability to raise additional income to support the wider council budget.
- The lack of consistency in the approach to commercial activity.
- Freedom of Information requests – most requests received by the council are from journalists or researchers, or are looking for sales opportunities, and are not in the spirit of why the legislation was initially introduced. Much of the information requested is publicly available, and we waste resources pointing requestors to that information.
- GDPR legislation affects our ability to work across services internally as well as with partners.
- Planning projects are delayed as timely responses are not received by third party statutory consultees and we have no powers to address this.
- Construction and regeneration projects of all scales can be delayed by the protracted processes, lack of communication and delays when seeking utility provider input. Again, there are no powers to address this.
- Government support is needed to address the problem of cost shunting as a result of decisions taken by upper tier authorities that result in lower tier councils having to pick up the issue much further down the line, at which point it is often more reactive and therefore costly.
- The number of government returns that have to be completed on an annual basis, including the WGA that is a significant use of resource that produces little benefit to local authorities. There has also been an increase in the number of systems used for returns, which adds unnecessary complexity.
- Lack of transparency of grant allocations – our recent DEFRA allocation to support food waste collections is considerably lower than the cost of implementation and appears inconsistent with similar authorities.
- The council tax referendum limit – the % increase allowed is not keeping pace with inflation meaning that savings have to be made to services just to stand still and the £5 cash limit is almost worthless to lower tier authorities as the annual % increase is in excess of that amount.
- The evidence base required for the local plan and other ad hoc grant application processes necessitate the use of expensive consultants as authorities cannot afford (or need) to recruit posts to deliver the work required and then we are questioned about why we have used consultants.
- Local authorities need support to be able to recruit and retain skills within our workforce over the longer term. All authorities are struggling to recruit lawyers, planners, building control surveyors

and environmental health officers, we have engaged with the LGA/DLUHC workforce planning project that is aiming to improve the shortages in specific areas.

- The restrictions and limitations of funding to support the delivery of affordable housing has meant that projects have failed to get off the ground. This adds to the pressure on the provision of affordable housing and add cost burdens to an already overburdened budget.
- The restrictive rules with regards to the Apprenticeship Levy make it difficult to spend the levy on training and developing apprentices especially the requirement for 20% of the week is to be off the job training. It would be helpful if this requirement is in place for say 26 weeks of the year in line with most training courses and that on the job training supplements the development of apprentices for the remainder of the time.